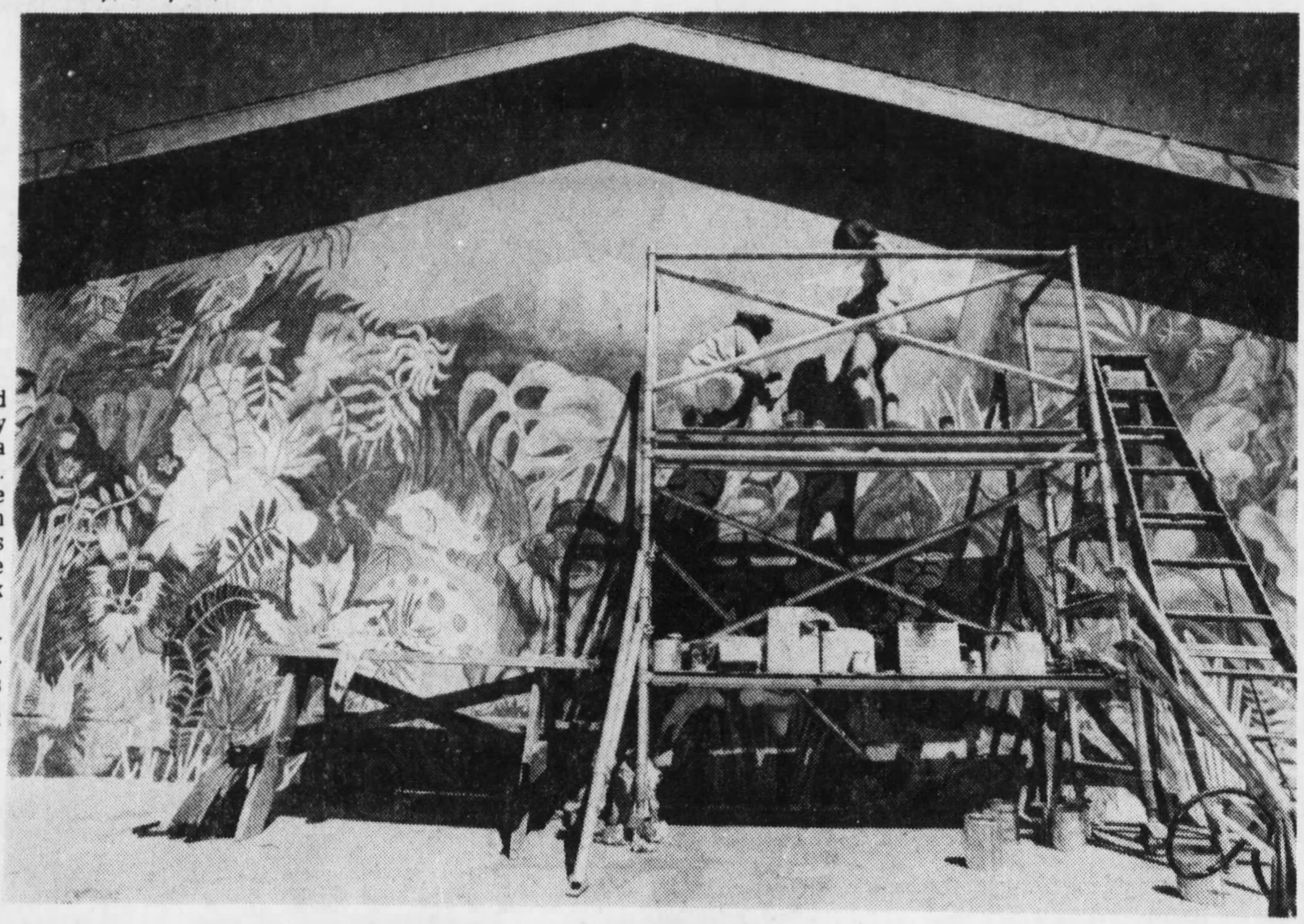
Patrol Paints Murals

By DALE POLLOCK
Sentinel Staff Writer



Jerry Alvarez, left, and Marianne Skiscim are two members of the El Tortuga Patrol, putting the finishing touches on the Mayan-themed mural on Live Oak School. The mural will be dedicated in official ceremonies on Thursday.

Walk up to the playground wall on Live Oak Elementary school, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and re-open them. Suddenly, you're in the middle of a Mayan jungle, with monkeys chattering, lions crawling over the landscape with a colorfully plumed ibex staring right at you.

It isn't a mirage in the summer heat. Instead, the explosion of color in Live Oak is simply the latest work of El Tortuga Patrol, a group of young muralists with a message.

Since its inception last year, the 11-member group of artists and their teachers have completed several murals throughout the county, including two "moveable" ones on buses. And the project doesn't cost the schools, where most of the murals have been located, a single penny.

Ralph D'Oliveira and Ray Romo are two artists who made a singular committment when they first came to work at Watsonville's Academe del Arte.

"As artists and muralists, we could either give the gift of just the mural to the community, or we could give the gifts and techniques we had picked up in our training back to the community," explains Romo.

That they have done with a vengeance. After doing one mural for Watsonville High, and being surprised at the enthusiastic reaction from the school's students, they set up El Tortuga Patrol, with the express purpose of instructing their younger charges in the revived genre of mural paintings.

The Live Oak mural may be the most obvious example of the group's work to most Santa Cruz residents. Patrol members report that hundreds of people have stopped by to gawk and admire the work, which fills an oversized wall facing the familiar blacktop accoutrements.

The myth presented in the brilliantly-colored work is the Popol Vuh, the Mayan Book of Creation. The story concerns two giants who refused to work, opting to play with a bat and ball instead. Told by the other gods to shape up or ship out, they were eventually punished by forcing to clear out a tangle of jungle that grew back each night, following their exhaustive labors.

Depicted on the mural is one of the gods, waking up, with the teeming jungle around him. "One person described it as an oasis in the middle of the desert," says D'Oliveira. "That's as good a description as any."

In case a Mayan legend doesn't seem to jibe with Live Oak's sprawling development, Romo has a ready explanation for the Patrol's visual imagery. "As artists, we see ourselves as educators. Our personal philosophy parallels Indian beliefs, although there are a lot of false ideas about Indian life and myths.

"What we want to do as muralists," continues Romo, "is correct the mistakes, and just throw out new ideas to the community."

That brings D'Oliveira to an observation of how the mural has acted as a social, as well as artistic, catalyst to the Live Oak Community. "The school, teachers, working staff and students have been so enthused. People from the community come walking up and tell us they really like what we're doing. Former graduates wish there was something like this when they were here."

D'Oliveira began working on the sketch in April, but the actual painting didn't begin until the end of June. A meeting is held each morning, and the group splits into two, with half working in Live Oak, and the other half on an Aztec sun calendar mural in Watsonville.

Romo and D'Oliveira act as technical advisors, but it is the nine students supplied by the Youth Employment Service that do the bulk of the work, and get paid for it, too. "The school is in effect giving us the opportunity to teach students the difficult methods of painting, airbrush, glazing and feathering," notes D'Oliveira.

Feathering is a mural technique developed by Romo that gives the illusion of visual space. "With a big wall like this, you have to break up the plane." The group is using a special polytech paint developed by Luis Guiterres, a Mexican muralist, that has extreme brilliancy, a gloss that will be heightened by the plastic film that will be coated over the mural when finished.

For the students, the experience has been unbeatable. "Last summer I worked at the beach picking up paper," said Tony Lopez. "Can you imagine the difference? I used to see paintings on a wall, but I never thought I could do it."

Gilbert Sanchez is another student, one of the few with an art background, who has devoted all his time and energy to mural planning and painting. He got so carried away he did a full-scale mural himself at Renaissance High School, with only limited help from D'Oliveira.

The program is funded through the CETA program, YES and County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services, which kicked in $1,500 for supplies. After the Patrol submits a sketch, they get together with the school or institution and hammer out a mutually-likable design.

The mural will be dedicated in special ceremonies at Live Oak School on Thursday, representing the culmination of months of work for Patrol members. Along with those already mentioned, they include Jesse Placencia, Steve Lopez, Manuel Romero, Ralph Razo, Jose Gerna, Jerry Alvarez, Marianne Skiscem, Dennis Martinez and Sylvia Torres.

"People think of murals as big warehouses in urban areas," comments Romo. "We don't have that height, but we have length. And we don't have the size of some murals, but we do have a lack of other buildings, so our mural really stands out.

"In fact," muses D'Oliviera, "this mural has become the dominant image of this area." Who would have ever thought the Mayans could take over Live Oak?

Scouts Head For Jamboree

A number of Boy Scouts, Explorers and leaders will leave from this area for a National Scout Jamboree at Moraine State Park in Pennsylvania, Aug. 3 - 9.

Flying to the jamboree will be: Charles Rickard, Frank Cunningham, Sr., Robert Bem, Lawrence Brightwell, Jr., B. Scott Caldwell, Kevin Cooper, Mark Fendorf, John Harbison, Jeff Holdner.

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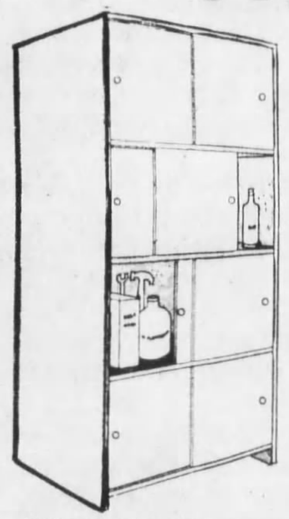

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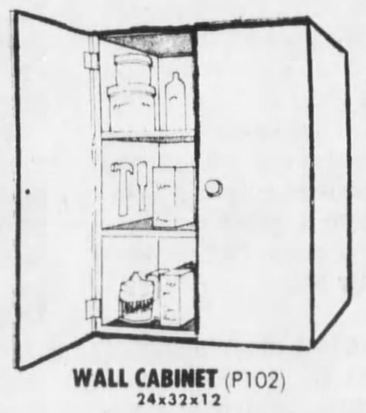

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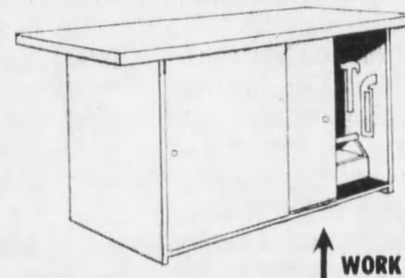

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